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SUBJECT: (C/NF) NIGERIA: AL-AZHAR PREACHERS DEPLOYED TO
SOUTH

REF: 07 ABUJA 2632

Classified By: PolCouns Walter Pflaumer, reasons 1.4 (b, c, & d).

11. (C//NF) Egyptian Embassy First Secretary told PolOff April 7 that the Government of Egypt (GOE) has recently begun deploying preachers from Cairo, s renowned Islamic seminary al-Azhar University to serve as instructors in private Islamic secondary schools throughout central and southern Nigeria, including Ilorin, Ibadan, Lagos, and Port Harcourt. The GOE is funding an estimated sixty preachers to remain in Nigeria for a period of four years, providing food, lodging, and a monthly stipend. The Egyptian Ambassador told PolOff April 1 that the GOE had previously funded exchange programs between al-Azhar scholars and African Islamic scholars in various sub-Saharan African countries.

12. (C//NF) Nigeria has witnessed an explosion in private Islamic secondary institutions since the late 1970s. Arabic and Islamic Studies departments have been a fixture of several universities, including the University of Ibadan. However, the burgeoning interest in Arabic and Islamic education for primary and secondary school students is more recent, and borne out of increased exposure and travel to the Muslim world and the mounting desire of Nigerian Muslims (and their children) to connect with other Muslims in the Arab world through religion. Concomitantly, as Nigerian Muslims have become more aware of their connection to the Arab world (and Islamic community worldwide), political grievances such as the Palestinian conflict and the Iraq War have earned greater currency in Nigeria. While Arabic is not spoken generally among Nigerian Muslims, whether from the South-West or the North, those imams or Islamic leaders who are conversant in the language are perceived as having greater legitimacy and authority to articulate Islamic issues.

13. (C//NF) COMMENT: As one of the oldest and most prominent Islamic seminaries in the Muslim world, al-Azhar exercises considerable influence. Salafism, which eschews cultural syncretism and proffers a modernist approach to Islam, has been a principal intellectual current at al-Azhar alongside more traditional interpretations of Islamic doctrine. Egypt's ties to what is now Nigeria date back several centuries, when itinerant Islamic scholars from Cairo first came to this region through the Kanem Empire (in present day Borno state). In modern times, regular flights between Kano and Cairo via Egypt Air have facilitated travel for imams and

other Islamic scholars from northern Nigeria to al-Azhar. Several imams with whom PolOff has spoken in Kano, Katsina, and Maiduguri claim to have been educated at al-Azhar.

14. (S//NF) COMMENT CONT,D: Moreover, with increased political and economic contact between Nigeria and the Arab world, Nigeria has also come within Saudi Arabia and Egypt's ambit of religious influence. Saudi Arabia's rising Wahabbi influence has helped erode northern Nigeria's strong tradition of Sufism, which had a moderating impact on Islamic practice historically. Egypt's interest in extending its influence to southern Nigeria may relate to its desire to "compete" with or counter Saudi Arabia's Wahabbi influence. In addition, southern Nigerian Muslims (particularly of Yoruba extraction) may welcome Egyptian religious influence as a way to challenge claims that Hausa-Fulani culture (which has stronger ties to Saudi Arabian Wahabbi thought) is somehow more authentic. (Pakistan's Tablighi Jamaat and Ahmadiyya Movement are also present in Nigeria, though on a much smaller scale. Post will report septel an analysis of foreign influences on Islam in Nigeria.) Importantly, while the intent of the preachers ostensibly is to teach Islam, Christian communities in southern Nigeria may view the preachers and the potential growth of Islamic schools in traditionally Christian areas with trepidation or hostility, in much the same way that Christian encroachment in erstwhile Muslim areas of the North has led to unease and violence.
END COMMENT.
SANDERS